

Trauma Narration and Life Dilemma: The Paradox of Trauma Healing in “Manchester by the Sea”

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Abstract: Based on the trauma theory, this paper analyzes the trauma writing of the protagonist Lee Chandler and his nephew Patrick in the film “Manchester by the Sea”. By tracing the development of trauma theory from medicine to socio-cultural fields, this film reveals the traumatic symptoms of emotional numbness, flashback, and self exile caused by Lee’s family tragedy due to negligence. Lee’s refusal to pursue narrative healing contrasts sharply with his nephew Patrick’s self-healing tendency. The study points out that although domestic trauma research often emphasizes “tracing the roots to achieve recovery”, Lee’s case shows that some traumas are difficult to truly recover from due to the irreconcilable nature of self condemnation. Through the visualization of traumatic memories, the movie not only presents the healing potential of traumatic narratives, but also acknowledge the legitimacy of the “irreconcilable” dilemma in life, providing a new interpretation dimension for trauma writing.

Keywords: Manchester by the Sea; traumatic narrative; life dilemma.

1. INTRODUCTION

Trauma, as a cross disciplinary issue in psychology and literary research, has always focused on how humans face unbearable pain in life. The film “Manchester by the Sea” (2016) is a grim portrait of Lee Chandler’s predicament in the aftermath of a family tragedy: his three children are killed in a fire due to drunken negligence, and Lee is reduced to a walking corpse in self-punishment until he becomes the guardian of his nephew Patrick and is forced to confront his traumatic memories. Domestic research mostly focuses on the “recovery narrative” of traumatized individuals, while this article attempts to explore why Lee’s trauma in the film became an “irreparable life rift” through trauma theory, and analyze how the film achieves witness and comfort of trauma through visual storytelling. The study not only reveals the healing potential of trauma narratives, but also reflects on individuals’ right to “refuse reconciliation” in trauma, providing visual and textual support for understanding complex human nature.

2. THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF TRAUMA THEORY

The term “trauma” originates from Greek and is a medical term that refers to a wound on a limb caused by external force. The study of “trauma” began with research on female hysteria, which was widely believed to be related to the uterus and considered a disease with strange symptoms. It is a female disease that originates from the uterus[1]. In the late 19th century, French theologian Jean-Martin Charcot observed, described and classified patients at the Salpêtrière hospital, and explained hysteria from a neurological perspective, pointing out that the cause of hysteria is essentially psychological rather than physiological. This research marked a new stage in the study of hysteria[2]. Afterwards, two of Charcot’s students, Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud, further explained the causes of hysteria and found a treatment through long conversations and relentless efforts with these hysterical female patients. They believe that psychological trauma led to hysteria, meaning that patients experienced emotionally unbearable events that ultimately trapped them in this hysterical state, causing their

consciousness to separate. The subconscious of trauma will continue to plague patients, and being surrounded by these invasive memories and subconsciousness will not be able to escape, ultimately leading to hysteria. They also proposed a method to alleviate hysteria by expressing traumatic memories.

The next phase of trauma research came after the First World War. Many soldiers who participated in World War I exhibited characteristics similar to hysterical women, such as becoming silent, losing memory, losing consciousness, and experiencing mental breakdowns. At first, such behavior was believed to be caused by physical injuries. However, many soldiers who were not physically injured also exhibited such symptoms. Through research, British psychologist Charles Myers attributed this to the impact of shell explosions[3]. Myers pointed out that long-term exposure to emotional stress from violent death is enough to produce a neurosis syndrome similar to male hysteria[4]. However, research on the trauma of World War I survivors was not systematic until after the Vietnam War, when research on the pain suffered by soldiers received sufficient attention, as some heroes who returned from the Vietnam War returned their medals and confessed to their crimes on the battlefield. They refer to themselves as a “rap group” and “regularly hold meetings to review and revisit their experiences of war trauma”[5]. Their testimony has drawn public attention to the psychological harm caused by war. Subsequently, hundreds of informal “rap groups” emerged, which forced the US government to launch psychological treatment programs for these soldiers. In 1979, the US Congress, and in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association announced that about 30% of the 3.1 million Vietnam War veterans suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These soldiers with PTSD were constantly troubled by traumatic events on the battlefield, unable to adapt to normal life, and “talking cures” was still considered the most effective treatment.

Since the 1970s, the focus of trauma research has shifted to the privacy of family members, especially after the women’s liberation movement. People began to realize that “the most common post-traumatic illness is not men in war, but women in daily life”[6]. The most authoritative study of women’s trauma in family life is a study by Diana Russel in the 1980s that asked 900 randomly selected women about their experiences of domestic violence and sexual slavery, showing that “one in four women had been raped and one in three had experienced sexual abuse in childhood.[7]” Subsequently, research on adult rape then extended to children, most notably by Judith Herman, who studied sexual abuse of women and children and found that sexual abuse can be physically and psychologically damaging, with symptoms similar to those experienced by military veterans, including insomnia, nightmares, neurosis, and, worse, insomnia. It can even cause a split personality.

The study of trauma has gradually permeated into many fields such as literature, sociology, and history, from the original fields of medicine and psychology. The injured person needs to express their traumatic experience to alleviate and heal the trauma. At the same time, the narration of traumatic experiences requires listeners and witnesses, and literature is precisely the best form of witnessing traumatic memories. Literary works witness and explain trauma, thereby alleviating the pain of trauma. Trauma writing is a great way for people to see and understand trauma, including films.

3. TRAUMA WRITING IN THE FILM “MANCHESTER BY THE SEA”

“Manchester by the Sea” does not depict the Holocaust, nor the horrors of war or the trauma of domestic violence, but rather uses an experiential approach to make the audience feel the tragedy of life. The traumatic events in “Manchester by the Sea” revolve around two main lines. The reason for Lee’s trauma is that his own fault led to the death of his three children, thus breaking his marriage; And Patrick was due to his father’s death. There is a significant difference in the symptoms exhibited by the two protagonists after trauma.

Lee’s traumatic symptoms mainly include three types: first, emotional numbness. Emotional numbness is a symptom that occurs after experiencing a significant stress event, characterized by the victim losing a sense of security and becoming very fragile and helpless. People with emotional numbness exhibit a “indifferent” attitude or symptoms of confusion. Common traumatic events that trigger emotional numbness include the death of a loved one, car accidents, disasters, humiliating experiences, and so on. The opening of the film depicts Lee’s living situation as a janitor, mainly responsible for cleaning toilets, repairing water pipes, painting walls, and so on; At night, Lee becomes a drunkard and troublemaker in the bar, inexplicably getting into a fight and then returning to that rudimentary basement. Lee is living a life of self abandonment, doing the dirtiest and most tiring work, refusing to interact with anyone. He seems to have no family, no children, and no relatives. But even so, the audience can feel that this is a person with a “story” because his behavior is illogical and even has a “self-destructive” tendency. He is just using his own way to get rid of the shadow of the past, which is self punishment and redemption.

The second is excessive awakening and irritability. After experiencing a traumatic event, the victim's nerves become extremely sensitive due to extreme fear, leading to excessive arousal. People who suffer from excessive awakening often experience sleep difficulties, irritability, extreme terror, and excessive vigilance. They have always been vigilant, even small things can lead to uncontrollable extreme behavior and strong emotions. All of these symptoms are present in Lee, and one of the most obvious scenes in the film is when Lee is drinking alone at a bar and gets into a fight with a man who looks at him. The second scene shows Lee drinking at a bar after meeting his ex-wife. Someone accidentally touches him and he apologizes, but he still punches him hard. Lee's alertness and irritability were often reflected in his daily quarrels with his nephew Patrick.

The third is flashback and avoidance. According to Carruth's theory, long after the danger has passed, the traumatized person re-experiences the event as if it were constantly happening in the present. They can't resume their normal lives because the trauma keeps flashing back and time seems to stop at the moment of trauma. The traumatic moment becomes an aberrant encoding of memory and enters our consciousness at the same time, both in the awake state and in the traumatic nightmare of sleep[8]. When Lee receives the phone call that his brother has died, he is forced to return home to Manchester by the sea. Along the way, there are familiar objects, scenes of the Catholic Church with hints of original sin, memories of classical music accompanied by Bach, all of which suggest to the audience: what happened to Lee in Manchester? By his brother's will, Lee became the guardian of his nephew Patrick. When talking to the lawyer about his nephew's protection, the past experience flashed back to Lee's memory. At this moment, the audience realized that Lee also had family and friends. He had three children with his ex-wife Randy and had a very loving relationship, living a happy and fulfilling life. Until an unexpected tragedy, on a winter night, Lee drank too much alcohol and smoked marijuana and other drugs, went out to buy alcohol, forgot to close the fire panel of the fireplace, resulting in a fire at home, three children died in the fire, and his wife completely collapsed and divorced him. In his *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud stated: "People who have experienced shock, severe psychic trauma..... often brought back to traumatic situations"[9]. In the film, Lee dreams that his twins say to him, "Dad, can't you see we're on fire?" As a father, what a painful memory! Another scene is after his brother's death, he forgot to turn off the fire while cooking, and the alarm sounded. The audience can see that Lee's reaction was very strong at that time, indicating the psychological shadow of the fire on him. Carruth also pointed out that in order to break free from the repeated entanglement of traumatic memories, victims will develop their own unique defense methods, such as avoiding all social relationships or choosing to forget painful experiences[10]. The will made Lee Patrick's guardian, and Lee's instinct was to resist, not because he did not want to fulfill his brother's will, nor did he dislike the nephew, because accepting the will would mean returning to Manchester, which he had tried so hard to avoid, because this place would remind Lee that every day he spent in the town, painful memories would torment him one more day. Second, since his own child died in the fire, Lee has deprived himself of his rights as a father, and he is no longer qualified to be a father, which is another reason why he does not want to be a guardian. The town was too heavy for Lee and he didn't have the courage to face it, so he chose to escape.

Patrick, Lee's 16-year-old nephew, was relatively calmer and more self-contained in coping with the news of his father's death, although the sight of frozen food in the refrigerator made him weep at the thought of his father lying in the freezer. But Patrick's life was not disrupted. He continued to mix with girls, band rehearsals, and school. He's one of the few people who has the ability to heal himself.

4. HEALING AND ANTI-HEALING

After experiencing a traumatic event, the victims' sense of security, self-worth, and meaning of life are destroyed. They are frightened, feel helpless and frustrated, and crave to find ways to recover from the trauma. In the book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman states: "Recovery unfolds in three phases, with the central task of the first phase being to establish safety, the second phase being to commemorate and mourn, and the third phase being to reconnect with everyday life.[11]" For victims, reconnecting with others is also crucial in trauma recovery. The injured can gain confidence, faith, and hope through contact with others, and reshape the psychological ability destroyed by the traumatic event. The survival instinct of human beings also determines their instinct to heal wounds, whether they are physical or psychological. Patrick's intention to overcome the trauma is evident. On the night of his father's death, he asked his uncle Lee if he could invite his friends to his house, which was a manifestation of his desire to establish a sense of security. Afterwards, Patrick kept asking out his two girlfriends and thinking about how to have sex with them, which seemed out of place with his father's death. However, this showed his inner fear and emptiness, and doing so could temporarily forget his father lying in the funeral home. This was an effective way for him to try to establish a connection with the outside world. There is also a scene in the

film where Patrick has always had a connection with his mother. Although the mother did not fulfill her responsibilities as a mother, the child's spiritual attachment to the mother has always existed. After his father passed away, his mother invited Patrick to her new home as a guest, but obviously she was very nervous and not prepared to accept her son. Moreover, it can be seen from the email from her new husband to Patrick that he clearly did not accept Patrick, which made him feel very frustrated. Patrick had always been unable to understand why uncle Lee did not want to become his guardian. After his mother's spiritual support is cut off, he prefers his uncle to become his reliance, but his uncle always wants to return to Boston, which seems to aggravate his inner unease, so there will be a scene of fierce quarrel between his uncle and nephew in the film. Patrick said: You're just a janitor. It doesn't matter where you work. Patrick's reasons for not leaving Manchester were his friends, the hockey team, the basketball team, his girlfriends, and his boat. Another way Patrick deals with trauma is through catharsis. He didn't cry after his father's death, and when he went to the funeral home to see his father's body, he only took a ceremonial glance before hastily leaving because he was scared. It wasn't until he saw the frozen chicken in the fridge and thought of his father's frozen body in the morgue that he suddenly broke down in tears and released his suppressed emotions. At the end of the film, nephew Patrick sees three photo frames in his uncle's room and finally understands why he cannot continue living in the small town. He decides to respect his uncle's choice. These are all conscious and unconscious efforts made by Patrick after suffering trauma, in stark contrast to uncle Lee's daily life of psychological isolation and distance.

Throughout the film, Lee refuses to move on from his trauma, cutting off all avenues of treatment. Lee did not cry when he lost his children, but the director used a lot of "line drawings" to express his emotions, so that we can feel the real pain in the character's mind. This kind of pain with no way to vent is more depressing and more tormenting than crying. Freud pointed out that after time dilutes the trauma of the grieving subject, the injured need to transfer love from the lost object to a new object in order to achieve empathy. And empathy helps the injured overcome silence and forgetfulness, and restore memory. But the passing of the children and the departure of the wife have completely cut off the path of empathy. The film portrays Lee's post-traumatic behavior through a series of daily life experiences. When Lee was cleaning the bathroom for a client, the hostess expressed her love for him politely by talking loudly to her friend. He politely avoided the gesture and declined the love. Obviously, he is no longer able to build deep and intimate relationships. Judith Herman pointed out that the victim can externalize their traumatic experience by sharing it with the listener or writing it to the reader, in order to re-evaluate the traumatic experience, reshape themselves, and establish connections with others and the external world[12]. From this, it can be seen that the power of narrative can effectively vent emotions and repair wounds, but Lee refuses to communicate with anyone. One scene in the film is when Patrick goes to his girlfriend's band rehearsal. In order to fulfill his little plan, he asks his uncle to chat with his girlfriend's mother downstairs. However, the result is that she can only go upstairs and say to her daughter and Patrick, "I can't stay downstairs anymore. I've been trying to chat with him for half an hour, but it's really unsettling. I couldn't get your uncle to talk." Patrick also tried to tell his girlfriend's mother about topics that uncle might be interested in, but it was all in vain. Patrick also asked his uncle on the way back: Can't you talk like other adults? Can't you just talk for half an hour? Talk about what interest rates... All my uncle's answers were No, No, No... Lee is not showing sadness or decadence, but a hopeless self-isolation.

In addition, the audience can see that each time he moves, Lee will carefully wrap the three picture frames and take away, and the film does not give these three photos a front lens from beginning to end, but the audience can guess the people in the photos: Lee's three children who died in the fire. These photos are not only a reminder of her children, but also a punishment for herself. We can see that Li has been immersed in the painful experiences of the past and cannot extricate himself. The pain of losing a loved one often does not erupt in an instant, but in the daily life after the loved one leaves. Lee, who lost his children, can only use violent acts of self-harm when he is unhappy, or start a fight in a bar, and has already turned himself into a walking corpse. The reunion of Lee and his wife provides both parties with an opportunity to untie their emotional knots. The desire for communication between the two is strong, but a thousand words cannot be spoken. Their lines have been interrupted by each other multiple times, but these incoherent conversations do not affect the audience's understanding at all. Instead, they better reflect the emotions, tension, and grief of the two people after their reunion. This scene presents the audience with the most heartbreaking moment in this film. Randy, the ex-wife who formed a new family, has come out of the shadow, she hopes that Lee can also be the same as herself, but after such a long time, Randy finally realized that Lee's inner pain is no less than her own, even more painful than her. She forgave Lee and, in doing so, freed herself from that painful memory. Lee could only refuse, shake his head, and hurry away--a desperate survivor who never expected anyone to forgive him, who perhaps even wanted the world to hate him, for whom regret and degradation were the only way to live the rest of his life[13]. Lee's ex-wife has remarried and has children, and his sister-

in-law, who ran away from home early, has a new family. Everyone's life continues, except for Lee, which has come to a standstill. So at the end of the film, Lee said to his nephew, "I can't bear it anymore." He found a job in Boston and had George adopt Patrick. All of this indicates that until the end of the film, Lee still hasn't recovered from the trauma. Lee cut off all possibilities of getting out of the trauma, left the place where the decisive factors came into play, rejected all direct contacts with his ex-wife Randy who could get out of the trauma, refused any opportunity to communicate with others, and was unwilling to mention the tragedy that broke his heart. He could not forgive himself, nor did he think he could forgive himself, so he continued to punish himself.

5. CONCLUSION

With a restrained and sharp narrative, "Manchester by the Sea" presents the dual aspects of trauma writing: on the one hand, Patrick goes to healing through social reconstruction and emotional catharsis, confirming the healing path of "connection and narrative" in trauma research; Lee Chandler's trauma, on the other hand, became too heavy for life to bear because of the irreconcilability of his self-condemnation. The film does not resolve the pain with a conciliatory ending, but transforms the trauma into an ongoing state of life through images such as cracked ice and fire alarms. This narrative choice of "refusing to heal" not only challenges the linear recovery model of traditional trauma research, but also shows that image narrative can transcend the function of psychological healing and become an artistic container carrying complex human nature and existential dilemmas. When Lee finally chooses to leave Manchester, the film, with the silence of the image, completes the ultimate inquiry into the nature of trauma -- some trauma may not "get over", but can be witnessed, understood, and acquired the dignity of existence in the narrative.

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